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ABSTRACT

Research indicates that most blacks shift between a variety of social registers to produce inherent variability in the features of their speech, which in turn causes problems for college composition instruction. Writing teachers must avoid holding a stereotypic view of black speech, be sensitive to the varying social registers of black speech, and make black students understand that the use of standard English variants does not necessitate a rejection of the students' own culture in favor of white middle class culture. Black students are accustomed to performing in high context situations, where there is a high degree of familiarity with the situation and the people in it and, consequently, an awareness of what social register of language to use. This contrasts with the writing classroom's low context environment and low degree of shared knowledge. By demonstrating the differences between formal, low context style and informal, high context style, and noting when each should be used, writing teachers can be more effective in helping black students make the transition to college writing. (RL)

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Stylistic Variation in Black English Vernacular

And

The Teaching of College Composition

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When the narrator in the Langston Huges novel, Simple Takes a Wife, asks Simple, "Why do you sometimes say 'I were,' and at other times, 'I was,' Simple responds with the common sense statement: "Because sometimes I were and sometimes I was .... I was at Niagra Falls and I were at the Grand Canyon-- since that were in the distant past. I was more recently at Niagra Falls."

"I see [the narator responds]. Was is more immediate. Were is way back yonder."

"Somewhatly right. But not being colleged like you, I do not always speak like I came form the North."[1]

For the last twenty years, linguists have been furiously analyzing the dialect of Simple and his peers so that English teachers can "college" them. Colleging them has become especially important in composition courses. Because linguistic analyses of Black English Vernacular (hereafter referred to as BEV), composition teachers now know that grammatical structures such as lack of agreement between subject and verb (he go), absence of Z possessive morpheme (the boy hat is red), and phonological features such as final consonant cluster reduction (tes for test) and substitution of alveolar stops /t/ and /d/ for dental fricatives /ɵ/ and /ð/ (tree for three and dem for them) are characteristic of BEV. However, paying too attention to the grammatical and phonological features of BEV gives a distorted view of the Black speech community. Such a lack of perspective too easily can lead to the idea that "street" or "gang" talk is the primary, or perhaps only, style that Black students have when they start college. As a result, as soon the composition teacher notices dialect interference between BEV and Edited

Edited Standard English (hereafter referred to as ESE), he/she all too often considers the student to have a ghettoese mentality. After all, these are characteristic of lower class Black ghetto speech. The danger in such stereotyping is that it too often leads to dehumanization of students and to the self-fulfilling prophecy. All too often students react as teachers expect them to act.

It is important to remember that the Black community, like any speech community, is not limited to a single style of speech. It is also necessary for teachers to keep in mind that the college freshman, simply by being in college, is what Labov would call a "lame" so that" he inevitably [has] acquired an ability to shift towards the standard language and has [had] more occasion to do so."[2] However, even in the peer-centered street culture, there is a wide variety of styles. Richard Wright, a linguist at Howard University, points out that when he was growing up in Washington, D.C.:

> Our peer group behaviors were one of a variety of behaviors in which it was important to demonstrate competence. In addition to "vernacular".... we engaged in a variety of natural interation with community people in which other varieties of a more standard nature were called for.[3]

In fact Wright emphasized that being able to skillfully manipulate a more elaborate language on certain appropriate occassions received the vocal approval of peer group members.

This shifting between social registers helps to produce inherent

variablility. Most features that characterize BEV fluctuate so that they can be quantified. For instance, Wolfram found that absence of agreement between subject and verb occurred 74% of the time and absence of the possessive {Z} morpheme occurred 34% of the time (A Sociolinquistic Description of Detroit Negro Speech). With the possible exception of iterative BEV, the use of which cannot be tabulated, none of features of BEV, were categorical. It is this inherent variability that causes the problem in teaching composition.

Because students come into college with variable rules, their papers are inconsistent with respect to grammar. Characteristic features of BEV are sometimes present and sometimes absent in the same paper and sometimes even in the same sentence. The teacher's reaction to these inconsistencies, or variable rules, is often the determining factor in the success or failure of the composition student. It is important for the teacher to remember that these apparent inconsistencies are the result of the inherent variability of BEV, not laziness or carelessness on the part of the student. In the course of language evolution, a change which begins as a variable rule often goes to completion and becomes categorical. It is the teacher's job to speed up the process of language change as the student moves from informal oral street language to formal written language which requires the categorical rules of formal grammar.

In helping the student master appropriate usage as he/she moves from informal to formal settings, the teacher must remember that when there is variation in linguistic rules, different social values are attached to each variant. What happens is that the social values of the group who use the

variant become attached to it. It is this promulgation and solidarity of group identity that gives BEV its power. What the composition teacher must do is to make the Black student understand that the use of ESE variants does not necessitate a rejection of his own culture in favor of white middle class culture.

To do this, the teacher needs to be aware of the student's verbal code and to make the student aware that he/she is trying to aid him in developing a formal written style which will extend his communications network, not change or erradicate his oral code. As anyone who has worked with inner city youths knows, BEV speakers are quite verbal and have a keen sense of oral communication. However, their speech patterns differ radically from what is expected in college classes in significant ways.

First of all, the function of verbal games such as shucking, rapping, and signifying is involved with performance and audience participation. Because the purpose of these games is to assert oneself and to arouse emotions in others, the language needs to be what Joos in The Five Clocks calls casual or intimate. The setting in which the speaker performs is always a high context situation, one where there is a high degree of shared knowledge and background information.

Because Black students are used to performing in high context situations, they do well where there is a high degree of familiarity with the situation and the people in it. Unfortunately, the composition classroom is a low context environment, one with a low degree of shared knowledge. For a composition program to be effective, it must develop the student's ability to deal effectively with low context situations. Because

a low context writing situation prohibits the student from relying on nonverbal cues which are characteristic of the peer group street culture, the teacher needs to help the student learn to communicate ideas without depending upon shared knowledge. The student needs to be shown when and how to provide the necessary background information.

If the student is to learn to control the low context written style demanded in the classroom, he must learn to avoid the intrusive I and the subjective approach to his material. Because his reader does not necessarily share the basic set of premises with him, the student cannot be assured of communicating with his audience simply by listing a series of concrete examples. What the student needs to learn is to state his premises and then use the deductive approach (with concrete examples) if he is going to communicate past his peer group to the larger English speaking world.

The following two passages demonstrate how Martin Luther King was able to vary his style to fit high as well as low context situations. Of course, we cannot expect our students to write as well as King; but by juxtaposing passages like these, we can show the student what is expected. The first passage, part of the "I Have a Dream" speech, was written for a high context situation. It was a speech delivered at the Lincoln Memorial during the Freedom March on Washington, D.C., in August 1963. In many ways it is similar to a sermon in the Black church. Everyone in the audience already knew King's dream and supported it or they would not have been there.

> I say to you today, my friends, even though we
> face the difficulties of today and tomorrow,
> I still have a dream. It is a dream rooted in

> the American dream. I have a dream that one day this nation will rise up and live out the true meaning of its creed: "We hold these truths to be self evident, that all men are created equal." I have a dream that one day, on the red hills of Georgia, sons of former slaves and the sons of former slave owners will be able to sit down together at the table of brotherhood. I have a dream that one day even the state of Mississippi, a state sweltering with the heat of injustice, sweltering with the heat of oppression, will be transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice. I have a dream that my four little children will one day live in a nation where they will not be judged by the color of their skin, but by the content of their character.[4]

The purpose of the speech is to provide an emotional release and at the same time to provide a rallying point for the demonstration. It does this by recalling common knowledge--the difficulties and the frustrations of the moment--yet it also offers hope for tomorrow. Note the rich descriptive phrases: "deeply rooted in the American dream," "a desert state sweltering with the heat of injustice." and "transformed into an oasis of freedom and justice."

Because the speech does carry such a powerful emotional impact, the repetition of "I have a dream" becomes a necessary communication device to drive home to the audience the important points: justice, equality, and brotherhood for Blacks is a dream today. While it may become a reality tomorrow, today it is still only a dream. It is by means of repetition that King is able to make certain that the semantic meaning of his message is not swallowed up in its emotionalism.

As beautiful and as effective as this passage is--and much of it is poetry, complete with alliteration and metaphore--it is not the type of writing that is demanded in college composition classes. Because it is addressed to a group that shares a common set of premises, it does not need to present background information. Because the audience shares a common set of goals, it does not need to present a logical argument or new information. Most of the speech, like a sermon in the Black church, is a restatement or elaboration of the I have a dream thesis: while injustice exists today, I dream tomorrow will be better. Because of these features, it is not a good example of what a composition should be. It does not have any nonstandard grammatical features so that it would be a passing paper. However, it does lack a thesis statement and the three supporting paragraphs. The rich descriptive phrases, the lack of sentence variety (too much parallelism), and the faulty paragraph structure are all elements that college students are expected to avoid in their writing. However, the most criticized element of the speech probably would be the repetition of "I have a dream." As the Harbrace College Handbook, 8th ed., the oft-quoted bible for composition teachers clearly states, "...be careful in your writing not to use the same word twice or to make the same statement twice in slightly different words"

(p. 247). In type, if not in quality, King's speech is the kind of writing that many inner city Black freshman turn in for their first themes.

In contrast to the "I have a Dream" speech, the second example of King's writing is the type of writing that most composition teachers want their student to write. As opposed to the high context situation of the first passage, "A Testament of Hope" (King's last published essay which appeared in the January 1969 issue of Playboy) is a low context one.

> Whenever I am asked my opinion of the current state of the civil rights movement, I am forced to pause: it is not easy to describe a crisis so profound that it has caused the most powerful nation in the world to stager in confusion and bewilderment. Today's problems are so acute because the tragic evasions and defaults of several centuries have accumulated to disasterous proportions. The luxury of a leisurely approach to urgent solutions--the ease of gradualism--was forfeited by ignoring the issues for too long. The nation waited until the black man was explosive with fury before stirring itself even to partial concern. Confronted now with the interrelated problems of war, inflation, urban decay, white blacklash and a climate of violence, it is forced to address itself to race relations and poverty and it is tragically unprepared. What might once have been a series

of separate problems now merge into a social crises of almost stupefying complexity. (p. 174)

Notice how immediately King begins to fill in background information. He tells us immediately why he is writing. He uses none of the metaphorical language of the first passage. All of the beautiful parallelism of the first passage is absent. Instead he develops the argument in a straightforward manner. He leaves nothing, or as little as possible, for the reader to assume. In the remaining part of the passage, he goes on to demonstrate how war, inflation, urban decay, white backlash, and a climate of violence are interrelated and how race relations and poverty are part of the same social crisis. Technically, it is a marvelous example of the type of writing that is expected from composition students. However, as excellent as it is, it is no "better" than the first example. It simply better fits the formal, low context criteria demanded in composition classes.

In aiding the student's move from a high context vernacular style to a low context, formal or elaborated style, composition teachers need to be aware of inherent variability. As students first begin learning low context writing, the teacher should expect stylistic, as well as grammatical variation, between the two systems. However, as the formal writing system becomes internalized, the stylistic variable rules should become invariant. Because moving from the high context vernacular situation to the low context written situation involves a functional shift with a set of grammatical rules which are categorical, it is more efficient to treat the grammatical differences between BEV and SSE as a set of stylistic features dependent upon a formal code, not as separate items. To do this, composition teachers need

to show students how low context situations and formal grammatical usage are linked.

In moving to low context situations, the teacher needs to keep in mind that in BEV culture, the words themselves are not as important as the context in which they are used. It is the social setting and the style of delivery that determine the meaning. For example, the term bad can signify negative qualities as in "He's a bad man" or positive qualities as in "He's a baaad man," depending upon the intonation and stress. Teachers should not make the mistake of looking at the individual words, phrases, or grammatical units to determine the verbal ability of their students. It is essential to consider the social setting, frame of reference, and context to determine their verbal dexterity. By failing to pay attention to the verbal patterns, the teacher makes it difficult for Black students to achieve success in school. Early in his/her educational experience the Black child has learned that if he writes as he talks, the teacher will consider his/her work inadequate. For this reason most Black students have developed a phobia against writing by the time they reach college and are often convinced that they cannot write.

By demonstrating the differences between formal, low context style and informal, high context style and when each should be used, teachers can effectively help students make the transition to college writing. To do this, the teacher must be explicit about the characteristics of each style and when each should be used. Also, the student needs to know that he has the right to maintain BEV and that what the teacher is trying to do is to help him expand his perceptions of the world by extending his communication network to include formal, low context English. Concentrating on traditional grammar drills seem

to have little effect on student writing unless the drills are integrated with exercises that clarify low context situations. Modifying grammatical usage in itself will not improve writing. As Simple tells the narrator, "Neither is or are reduces expenses. Funerals and formals is both high, so what difference do it make." Hopefully, teachers can make learning formal English less expensive to the psyche than the funerals of dropping out of school.

Footnotes

1. Langston Hughes, Simple Takes a Wife (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1953), pp. 38-39.

2. William Labov, "The Linguistic Consequences of Being a Lame" in Language in the Inner City (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1972), p. 72.

3. Richard Wright, "Black English," Language in Society 4 (1975), pp. 194-195.

4. Quoted from James D. Lester, Patterns: Readings for Composition (Dubuque, Iowa: Wm. C. Brown, Publishers, 1974), p. 72.